THE GROUP WITH A DIFFERENCE
Galatians 5:29-6:10
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There is perhaps no more fascinating topic than the study of people in groups. "Group dynamics" is one of the names given to it, and it has to do with the way groups of people function in various situations. Increasingly it is an important subject for the fields of psychology and psychiatry. One of the most important new schools of psychiatry, for instance, practices what is called "conjoint Therapy". It begins with the assumption that individuals can only be understood in relationship with other people, i.e. within a group. It proceeds with the assumption that if individuals are going to be helped and healed, it can best happen in a group. Therefore whole families are treated by these Psychiatrists, not just the one individual who appears to be having a problem.

Groups of people tend to develop their own personality: Boards of Directors, Scout Troops, families, committees, fraternal organizations, bridge clubs - each tends to develop its own peculiar characteristics, its own mystique, its own esprit-de-corps; its own personality. But within each group all kinds of fascinating things occur between individuals. Interestingly - much the same thing goes on between separate individuals, regardless of the type of group under discussion. For instance, two groups such as the Womens' Temperance League, and a Saturday night poker club appear at first to be as different in terms of goals, values and personality as any two groups can be. But within each one of these two, the new-school psychiatrists tell us, the very same kinds of things are transpiring between individuals. The vocabulary is different: the topics discussed are different but the individuals come out doing the same things to each other.

One of these psychiatrists has written a good and funny book entitled Games People Play: in it the author contends that you and I, regardless of the group we are in at the moment, are constantly playing games. Combat is really a better word, for the author's suggestion is that these are very serious games, the fundamental purpose of which is to gain some strategic advantage over the other person. All sorts of games are described - all with the intent of putting the other person down, and rewarding the player with the attention and affection of the group; but most importantly with a sense of power and prestige.

I could illustrate from the life of this congregation but that might get a little sticky , so let me use a group with which you have little connection, and with which I am intimately involved - groups of ministers. When ministers get together, particularly if we're strangers, we always play a number of precise games. Everyone knows the rules, although they're not written down, and everybody plays. The contest begins with WSDYA? : "What School Did You Attend?" Now if you are uninitiated in the intricacies of theological education, this can get a little complex. Princeton scores well; Harvard and Yale the same. My school, the University of Chicago also has great prestige - but is plagued with a reputation for radical liberalism. Therefore, when I play with a Princeton graduate, I must quickly make some adjustments. To score well against him I merely drop the comment that two professors of mine, whom he will immediately recognize by name - have since moved to Princeton I do well with that one because he's left with the obvious conclusion that I had the great scholars at Chicago, he didn't have them because Princeton wasn't good enough to get them while he was there: therefore - well - the conclusion is obvious. There are may variations in WSDYA. But then we move on to HMMDYH: "How many members do you have?" Again, there are ways of compensating for a smaller membership than your opponent's such as: "We just cleaned our rolls last year." Even better is: "We're not much concerned with statistics" - or "We try to make membership mean something, so I guess we only get really committed people." That one puts you on top, no matter how small your membership. From there we go to WWYBLY: "What Was Your Budget Last year?" ; DYPTB - "Do You Plan to Build?" and so on, ad nauseum.

It happens every time: everybody plays, and ordinarily there is a winner: one individual emerges with attention, affection, power - and an inflated ego.

Now if you're honest, you will see that you play the same kinds of games all the time: WDYHW - "Where does your husband work?": WWYGSLN - "What was your golf score last ... ut?" : HYR - "Have you read?" - DYS "Did you see?"

It's fascinating to observe, although as a close friend of mine observed, "Once you realize what's happening, you're a little afraid to say anything to anybody!" It's fas... it's fun to play and observe: but at the same time it becomes a helpful tool in u... ...ding ourselves and other people. Most of all, I believe, it's a method of getting at this ag... old problem of relationships between people in the church.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was no personality psychologist, but listen to what he wrote. He quoted Luke 9:46: "And an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest", and then observed, "... no Christian Community ever comes together without this thought immediately emerging as a seed of discord." and later in the same essay: "... from the first moment when a man meets another person he is looking for a strategic position he can assume and hold over against that person." (1)

The book I am quoting is Life Together, a little manual Bonhoeffer wrote for an underground seminary established by the Confessing Church in Germany during World War II. It has a remarkably contemporary ring to it: "Where is there a person who does not with instinctive sureness find the spot where he can stand and defend himself but which he will never give up to another, for which he will fight with all the drive of his instinct of self-assertion?" (Ibid. p.91) He observed "...all this can occur in the most pious environment..." "...the Christian community must acknowledge that this exists within it..." and finally: "It's the struggle of the natural man for self-justification. He finds it only in comparing himself with others, in condemning and judging others. Self-justification and judging others go together..." (p.91)

That, we would say, is "telling it like it is"; that fits the Church like an uncomfortable shoe; perhaps every Church, but specifically this Church as you and I go about its life and work. "The struggle of natural man for self-justification," - that's the name of the game, and it ought to stick in our throats as we acknowledge it, and maybe even bring us to our knees in shame, because somewhere along the line we've been told that all the justifying that needs to be done was taken care of by Jesus Christ, and that of all the groups in the world - his group ought to be the one with a difference.

What difference? St. Paul wasn't a psychologist either, but he did know a little bit about people, and the grace of God, and sin and forgiveness, and this is what he told "the group in Galatia" around 50 A. D. "Let us not be ambitious for our own reputation for that only means making one another jealous... Carry one another's burdens and so live out the law of Christ... If a man thinks he is 'somebody', he is deceiving himself, for that very thought proves that he is nobody... every man must 'shoulder his own pack'" (Galatians 5:29-6:5, J.B. Phillips)

Paul used two very vivid images - a "burden" and a "load" or soldier's "pack". A burden is a crisis, a tragedy, a moral slip, a sin, an inherent failing. In the Christian community, the weight of these was to be borne by every member. Notice his sharp warning against judgment - which, according to Bonhoeffer, is just self-justification in disguise. Christians don't judge each other; rather they help and heal and bear each others' burdens. That's one emphasis. The other image is a soldier's pack: everyone must carry his own; the emphasis shifts to individual responsibility. There are certain burdens that each man must shoulder alone, no one else can help. In the Christian community the personal burden of each individual is to bear the burdens of every other individual. It's as simple as that. And I seriously wonder whether we ever get around to this dimension of being the Church.

Isn't it true that most of us remain pretty much untouched by the burdens of our fellow Christians? Aren't the same petty divisions rampant here among God's group, that flourish in any group? I think so - perhaps even more. Perhaps the nature of the

task - and the intimacy with others into which it throws us, causes us to be even more critical, more self-justifying, more adept at playing our silly little games, than anywhere else.

In Bonhoeffer's book that I quoted earlier he lists several disciplines, or ministries, which serve as guidelines in any Christian community. Listen to them: measure yourself by them.

First, The Ministry of Holding One's Tongue. "It must be the decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him." (p.93) If you are like me - a veteran "foot sticker in the mouth" this is sound, practical, good advice. But more to the point, it is the first small step in learning what it's like in "God's Group".

Second, The Ministry of Meekness: Bonhoeffer suggests that the only realistic way to assess your brother is by beginning with the acknowledgment that you are the worst of sinners. That's extreme: that's difficult, and threatening and insulting; and that's how it has to be with "God's Group".

Third, The Ministry of Listening. As you may know, this is one of my continuing concerns. We just don't listen to each other - in the church, out of the church, in groups, in informal conversation. You and I are so enamoured with our own opinions, our own feelings, our own need to justify and amplify our own strategic position, that we don't hear. We talk when we ought to listen. People come to us saying in effect: "My concern is vitally important to me, and I need to share it with someone. Won't you listen?". And before he's even described whatever it is, we've done him one better. "I have to have an operation next month, and I'm a little worried..." "Don't worry; when I had my gall bladder removed I was on the table six hours, etc. etc. " We just don't listen.

Fourth, The Ministry of Helpfulness. No task is too trifling, too menial for the Christian. In this group we're in the business of helping each other.

Finally, The Ministry of Bearing. It's all summed up in this one. We've been talking about mechanics, the small methods involved in being Christians to each other. But this matter of bearing pushes below the surface into the area of theology and faith and belief. In the Christian community we bear one another. Bonhoeffer put it this way: "The law of Christ is a law of bearing... the brother himself (not just his afflictions) is a burden to be borne by the Christian."(p.101) That means that when you and I come through these doors, and stand up here and affirm our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, we are agreeing - committing ourselves is a better phrase - to bear - stand - endure - accept - love all the other members of this group. As they are - not as they ought to be: not as we want them to be: but as they are, with all the irritating characteristics, their peevishness, their impatience. We become one of them: we vow not to pick, not to criticize, but to bear. We vow to let them be themselves - we can be ourselves. We are free, here in God's group, because we bear each other. Now if we haven't gotten around to this in Bethany Church; if this is not a group with a difference - that specific, beautiful difference, we have no business calling ourselves a Church of Jesus Christ.

After all, he was the greatest "burden bearer of all". He came down and walked among us, and strangely took on himself everything that is wrong with us. And the sheer weight of that heavy load made him weep. But he continued to bear the load, even when we rejected him and spat upon him and hung him up on a cross to die. The prophet saw how it would be when he came: "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows... he was bruised for our iniquities... and with his stripes we are healed. (Isaiah 53)

That's what the Gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. That's how Almighty God has chosen to deal with us - "bearing us". That's what God's people are all about. It is my hope - my prayer - but more to the point, it is the urgent will ofGod, that this be what Bethany Presbyterian Church be all about.

(1) Life Together , Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1954, p. 90.